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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES,

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH

OVERSIGHT HEARING ON FOREST AND RANGELAND HEALTH IN NEVADA'S GREAT BASIN

ELY, NEVADA

OCTOBER 27, 2003

Mr. Chairman:

We appreciate your invitation to participate in today's field hearing to discuss forest and rangeland health in Nevada's Great Basin. Ely, Nevada, is an appropriate setting to discuss our efforts to improve the health of our Nation's public forests and rangelands given its proximity to nearly 70 million acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands throughout portions of five states, including Nevada, that comprise the Great Basin. As we have testified in recent hearings on forest health before the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Department of the Interior strongly supports the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and H.R. 1904, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003.

Background

The need for action to restore our Nation's public forests and rangelands to long-term health has never been greater. Catastrophic fires are just one consequence of the deteriorating state of forest and rangeland health that now affects approximately 190 million acres of public land, an area almost triple the size of Nevada. Last year, wildfires burned about seven million acres of public and private lands across the Nation. This resulted in the destruction of over 800 primary residences and the evacuation of tens of thousands of people from hundreds of communities.

Although wildland fire activity this year has been less than the average of the last ten years, the potential for destructive wildfires is high. While this fire season did not produce the extensive fires experienced in 1999, 2000, and 2001, when over 2.6 million acres burned in Nevada, the on-going drought coupled with the changing condition of the Great Basin, as more fully discussed below, has significantly increased the potential for fire activity. All indications are that given the current conditions, the potential for large and severe fires in Nevada will continue in the foreseeable future.

Federal forests and rangelands across the country are also facing unusually high threats from the spread of invasive species. Changes in tree stand density, as well as in species composition and structure, due to decades of excluding or immediately suppressing fire, the lack of active management, and extended drought, are factors that have significantly affected the spread of invasive species. In the Great Basin, pinyon-juniper woodlands are growing so dense that they crowd out other plant communities and prevent a healthy mix of appropriate vegetation to support wildlife, wild horses, and livestock grazing.

Healthy Forests Initiative

Recognizing the existing crisis, President Bush proposed the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) in August 2002.

This initiative is based upon a common-sense approach to reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest and rangeland health. Our goal is to ensure the long-term safety and health of communities and natural resources in our care. Our responsibility is to ensure the long-term health of our forests and rangelands for the use, benefit and enjoyment of our citizens and for generations to come. The President directed Federal agencies to develop several administrative and legislative tools to restore deteriorating Federal lands to healthy conditions and assist in executing core components of the National Fire Plan, established in 2000. Since the President's announcement in August of 2002, the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture have taken several administrative actions to implement components of HFI, which include the following:

- Endangered Species Act Guidance – On December 11, 2002, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries (NOAA Fisheries) issued joint guidance that allows multiple projects to be grouped into one consultation and provides direction on how to consider and balance potential short- and long-term beneficial and adverse impacts to endangered species when evaluating projects. The goal is to recognize that project-specific, short-term adverse impacts on species need to be weighed against the longer-term watershed level benefits to those and other species that such projects will achieve.
- CEQ Memorandum & Model Environmental Assessment Projects – CEQ Chairman Connaughton issued guidance addressing the preparation of model environmental assessments (Model EA) for fuels treatment projects that improve administrative processes. These guidelines are now being applied on both Forest Service (FS) and Department of the Interior (DOI) agency model fuels-treatment projects. The Mesquite Hazardous Fuels Project, approved this past August after a public review period, is an on-going Model EA Project that addresses tamarisk-infested stretches of the Virgin River in southern Nevada near the towns of Mesquite and Bunkerville. Under current conditions, tamarisk, a highly flammable non-native species, is establishing its dominance in burned areas and posing an increased risk of wildfire. The BLM was able to initiate this project this past September by removing five acres of tamarisk. Through a combination of mechanical thinning, hand removal, and revegetation an additional 300 acres of tamarisk removal is targeted for completion next year, with a total planned treatment of 1,700 acres.
- Appeals Process Reform – Both the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and DOI made rule changes designed to encourage early and meaningful public participation in project planning, while continuing to provide the public an opportunity to seek review or to appeal project decisions. This enables issues to be resolved earlier in the project planning process, allowing for a more expedited application of hazardous fuels reduction projects.
- Categorical Exclusions (CE) – Both USDA and DOI have established new categorical exclusions, as provided under the National Environmental Policy Act, for certain hazardous fuels reduction projects and for post-fire rehabilitation projects. These new CEs shorten the time between identification of hazardous fuels treatment and restoration projects and their actual implementation on the ground.
- Proposed Section 7 Counterpart Regulation – FWS and NOAA Fisheries have proposed Section 7 joint counterpart regulations under the ESA to improve Section 7 consultation procedures for projects that support the National Fire Plan. The proposed regulations would provide, in some situations, an alternative to the existing Section 7 consultation process by authorizing the agencies to make certain determinations without project-specific consultation and concurrence of the FWS and NOAA Fisheries.

The Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003 (Public Law 108-7), signed into law on February 20, 2003, contains stewardship contracting authority, which allows the FS and the BLM to enter into long-term contracts with the private sector, non-profit organizations, local communities, and other entities to help achieve important land management objectives.

The public input period for the joint agency guidance for long-term implementation of stewardship contracting closed on July 28, 2003. The agencies are completing formal analysis of the input for consideration in the development of final agency guidance which should be available sometime later this fall. In 2004, the BLM is studying the implementation of several stewardship contracts in Nevada and across the West. These projects will focus on a range of forest and rangeland health initiatives as well as wildland urban interface fuels reduction projects and biomass utilization projects.

We believe these administrative actions will provide Federal land managers with useful tools as they work to restore public forest and rangelands to a condition where they can resist disease, insects, and catastrophic

fire.

Forest and Rangeland Health in Nevada's Great Basin

The Great Basin landscape, which encompasses much of Nevada, the western half of Utah, the lower third of Idaho, the southeast corner of Oregon, and a narrow strip of eastern California has seen a severe decline in native vegetation and wildlife as a result, in part, of wildfires. Between 1999 and 2003 wildland fires burned more than 3.3 million acres of land across Nevada's Great Basin.

Years of well-intentioned but misguided active suppression of wildfires have led to conditions in which pinyon and juniper trees dominate many areas where they historically occupied only small portions of the habitat. In such areas, the previously diverse landscape of perennial grasses, forbs, sagebrush and trees has evolved into a monoculture with limited species diversity. Noxious weeds and non-native annual grasses like cheatgrass, gained a foothold where fire weakened or removed native vegetation. The lack of a natural fire regime has contributed to these conditions. As a result, entire watersheds are being impacted; water quality is being degraded; native wildlife habitat is disappearing; forage for wild horses and livestock is reduced; and local economies are being threatened.

In an effort to address these problems, the Great Basin Restoration Initiative (GBRI) was developed with the goal of restoring and maintaining the Great Basin's diverse ecosystem through coordinated efforts between Federal and state governments and local community interests. A key component of GBRI is the Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition (ENLC) whose purpose is to help implement the Eastern Nevada Landscape Restoration Project (ENLRP), a restoration initiative designed to restore the ecosystem within the 10 million acres of public lands that are administered in eastern Nevada by the BLM Ely Field Office.

The ENLC is playing a significant role in restoration activities, assisting with project planning and implementation by establishing broad-based goals and objectives and providing the best available science for restoration projects. The Coalition's purpose is to develop a consensus on the Great Basin's overall health in eastern Nevada and to assist in the implementation of projects that restore the Great Basin to desired conditions. Currently, ENLC's partner list has over sixty members, including the BLM, representing a broad spectrum of public land users and interests like other Federal, city and county governments, tribal governments, local universities, and industry, conservation, and recreation groups.

In an effort to aggressively move forward under the ENLC partnership and begin implementing large-scale restoration initiatives, the BLM is conducting planning on a landscape scale. As part of the development of the Ely Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (Ely RMP/EIS), fuels reduction projects and other restoration treatments in the eastern Great Basin are being studied. This Plan is being developed with assistance from numerous cooperating entities, and ENLC is playing a large role in formulating the proposed actions and alternatives relative to restoration and maintenance of ecological health. When complete, the Ely RMP/EIS will serve as the base analysis and planning guidance for the ENLRP for restoration in the eastern Great Basin. To date, project scoping has been completed and alternatives are being developed. We expect to complete the RMP/EIS in the spring of 2005.

In other geographic regions of the Great Basin, the BLM has been an important partner with local entities in restoration efforts under the GBRI. One example of a cooperative project is the Markleeville Fuels Treatment Project:

· Markleeville Fuels Treatment Project - During the fall of 2002 and winter of 2003, the BLM Carson City Field Office completed a fuels treatment project in a forested area southeast of Lake Tahoe, Nevada. The Markleeville Fuels Treatment Project targeted public land adjacent to Marklevillage, a subdivision of Markleeville, California, with the aim of reducing crown fire potential and enhancing fire suppression capabilities. The treated area was adjacent to existing residences, as well as new residential development currently under construction. The BLM thinned the smaller trees and removed excess biomass on 45 heavily forested acres in an effort to clear "ladder" fuels and open up the overstory canopy for the growth and health of the remaining larger trees.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, the Department of the Interior is committed to working with Congress, State, local and tribal officials, and the public to advance common-sense solutions to protect communities and people, and to restore forest and rangeland health. We believe that H.R. 1904 provides the much needed authorities for the

agencies to move forward with the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. We were encouraged to see prompt action by the House on H.R. 1904. We hope the Senate takes up the measure this Congress. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear here today to discuss healthy forests and issues specific to Nevada and the Great Basin. We will be glad to answer any question you may have.